Alive and Kicking: News of Woke's Death Is Greatly Exaggerated

By John Murawski, RealClearInvestigations
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Just a few years ago, wearing a sombrero on Halloween could get you banished from polite society for the social crime of "cultural appropriation." Nutrition experts argued that preventing obesity was a form of racialized "fatphobia," even as scientific names of songbirds were purged in a moral campaign presumably aimed at white supremacy. Meanwhile, a slew of studies and papers and articles argued that punctuality, excellence, and other forms of professionalism are "the systemic, institutionalized centering of whiteness."

Today, as universities are dismantling their DEI bureaucracies, corporations are scaling back antiracism training, and academic trigger warnings and diversity pledges have become punch lines rather than cudgels, it is tempting to believe that the excesses of the woke movement have not just peaked but are a thing of the past, a passing fever dream of a peculiar era.

Woke was not a spontaneous outburst of moral righteousness born of COVID lockdowns and rage over George Floyd's death in police custody.
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Such thinking, however, underestimates the power and persistence of "wokeness," which was never a spontaneous outburst of moral righteousness born of COVID lockdowns and rage over George Floyd's death, but a philosophy and a worldview that were decades in the making.

The success of candidates backed by the Democratic Socialists of America in recent congressional primaries in New York and mayoral races in Los Angeles and the District of Columbia underscores the enduring appeal of a leftist moral framework that casts American society as a Machiavellian struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed.

Although the DSA's ascendancy in Democratic Party politics is a relatively new phenomenon, RCI's analysis of high-profile issues that have defined the movement in recent years – from slavery reparations and polyamory to transgender advocacy and anti-colonialism – reveals that this dogma is still percolating through the culture, with some new outbreak almost every week. These deeper currents indicate that the DSA is not a driver but a reflection of wokeness – a worldview that continues to make advances and succeeds at the ballot box.

Major League Baseball's official condemnation this month of San Francisco Giants players who wore caps with Bible quotes on Pride Night is one example of enforcing ideological conformity that harkens back to the Great Awokening of 2020. A recent newspaper headline, "Minneapolis City Hall dances into Pride Month with a drag show," is further evidence of woke's staying power.

Cultural Paradigm

In some ways, the social justice activists and politicians who envisioned diversity, equity, and inclusion as the pillars of American society have moved on to flirting with the moral imperative of micro-looting, lionizing Luigi Mangione for murdering a healthcare company executive, and celebrating the murder of Charlie Kirk.

However one understands wokeness, it is not a mere hodgepodge of slogans and sporadic Twitter mobs. It is, instead, a cultural paradigm shared by millions of people in the West who espouse the inherent moral supremacy of the underdog and doubt the moral legitimacy of their own societies. These ideas have been honed in volumes of academic scholarship and backed by nonprofit funding over the past half-century, and they are increasingly codified into law and policy (see accompanying sidebar article).

"People have the idea that it's a fad. They don't understand the antecedents and the roots," said Jason Hill, a philosophy professor at DePaul University who specializes in political philosophy and moral psychology.

"The moral grammar of the movements we call wokeness comes out of political liberalism," Hill said. "Liberalism is ultimately a perfectionist and utopian project. It's a never-ending project."

Liberalism assumed its modern form in the 1960s, Hill said, when liberals abandoned the ideal of individual rights for group rights, in response to persistent Jim Crow-era discrimination. This shift led to a commitment to “radical egalitarianism,” in which discrimination and injustice are measured not by individual bigotry but by unequal group outcomes, and “the state has a responsibility to rectify those disparities.” Supporters refer to this commitment in a variety of ways – leveling the playing field, positive discrimination, or dismantling structures of oppression.

“Gestating Parents”

Columbia University scholar John McWhorter says wokeness is “applied to different subjects” now.
Columbia University

The critique of racism actually intensified after American society committed to fighting it – progressive scholars have described the scourge as “systemic racism” and “racism without

racists" – expanding into a broader assault on other institutions and social norms, such as colorblindness, binary gender, colonialism, capitalism and other supposed legacies of European culture.

John McWhorter, a Columbia University linguist and longtime social commentator on race, said on a podcast this month that "the era of a particularly abusive kind of wokeness" – where opinions and speech were policed by the "excommunicator" and the "defenstrator" – has peaked in academia and in the arts. McWhorter said this militancy is "applied to different subjects" now – such as the Israel-Palestine debate, and in transgender advocacy.

"It's obvious that the leaders of the trans movement, especially since '20, have taken on that prosecutorial, anti-reasoning attitude," McWhorter said. "And I hate to say that a lot of them are still doing it, and they're modeling that on what they hoped would work in 2020 and 2021."

The continuing wave of social justice consciousness-raising will sound familiar to anyone who has been following the issue. State governments in states controlled by Democrats remain committed to establishing slavery reparations programs. The city of New York has issued a 375-page equity plan that sounds as if it were written in 2020 by Ibram X. Kendi – the bestselling author who argued that "the only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination." And academic conferences by groups like the Modern Language Association and the American Academy of Religion continue to indulge in agitprop chic, featuring such topics as "Unpacking White Dominance" and "Structural Violence and Gendered Resistance."

In the realm of gender politics, the normalization of polyamory is making inroads in municipal governments and in progressive churches. New York State this month replaced the words "mother" and "father" in the state's family law with "gestating parent" and a "non-gestating parent." Biological males who say they are girls continue winning trophies in girls' high school sports. And a federal court recently ruled that a biological male with fully intact male genitalia who identifies as a woman must be granted access to an all-women's nude spa (see sidebar).

Even the Daughters of the American Revolution has been swept up in the rapid social changes. The patriotic heritage group has voted to continue granting membership to transgender daughters who were born as sons.

The persistence and strength of this activism is underscored by the fact that it is happening as the Trump administration, Republican-controlled states, and conservative legal advocates are doing everything they can to stop these ideas from spreading. President Trump has threatened to withhold billions of dollars of federal funding to institutions that don't comply with his demands to remove DEI, antisemitism, and other social justice activism from the curriculum. The U.S. Justice Department is investigating the nation's leading medical schools for allegedly giving black applicants racial preferences over whites and Asians. Conservative states and a number of private universities have resumed using standardized tests in college admissions. Alabama and Texas have essentially put the state university systems in receivership in a bid to stop professors from teaching Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory to undergraduates.

But not all is as it seems. Some colleges that use standardized testing have different cutoffs for Asians, whites, and African Americans, based on proxies such as school district or other "holistic" indicators. Universities have slashed DEI programs, but subsequently a number of them were forced to fire diversity officers who were caught on camera bragging that their campus is still fully committed to DEI, and university officials have merely rebranded, not eliminated, race-based and queer-advocacy programs.

Core Beliefs

The core philosophical premise of wokeness is that social structures and cultural norms privilege some groups and harm or oppress others, creating power asymmetries and inequitable outcomes. Specific to the United States and Europe, males, heterosexuals, whites, and Christians continue to hoard power, privilege, and resources, benefitting from unfair advantage. The way to address this unjust dominance is through redistribution – by affirmative action, by diversity programs, by inclusive language, and by education that emphasizes the imperceptible workings of privilege and power – in order to equalize group outcomes. The criteria expand over time for what counts as harm and oppression, so that even challenging progressive beliefs or questioning black and queer peoples' "lived experience" becomes an offense against the moral order. Meanwhile, the number of victimized identity groups multiplies, creating an endless mission creep that inevitably leads to culture wars and political conflicts.

Reparations for African Americans and descendants of slavery remains a vital issue in several states.

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Reparations for African Americans and descendants of slavery are one of the original progressive social justice commitments. For decades, it was a pipe dream of black activists, but in recent years, it has been taken seriously by policymakers. At least five states and more than a dozen cities have created task forces or commissions to study slavery reparations, according to the Associated Press, and there have been more than 460 reparations initiatives in this country, from commemorations to restitution. This year, Maryland became the latest state to vote in favor of studying slavery reparations for African Americans, establishing a 23-member reparations commission to formulate an apology, assess collective responsibility, and calculate monetary compensation. Last fall, California became the first state to create a Slavery Descendants Bureau to certify black beneficiaries who will receive reparations in "recognition and healing for the savagery of forced human slavery in the United States." Internationally, the United Nations General Assembly recently passed a reparations resolution declaring the European enslavement of Africans as the "gravest crime against humanity."

Racial equity advocates are keeping a low profile to evade unwanted attention from the Trump administration. One can only assume that these activists have not abandoned their goals, but are merely biding their time. However, they have not completely exited the public stage, as evidenced by an ambitious equity plan issued by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's Office of Equity & Racial Justice. Among the plan's statements: "New York's history has been one of colonization, exploitation, and racial oppression." The 375-page document lauds Black Lives Matter, honors George Floyd, celebrates "intersectionality," and describes racism as a "public health crisis." Citing "grave injustices," "atrocities," "other forms of violence" committed against "Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and other People of Color, women, religious minorities, immigrants, people who are LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities" over the centuries, the plan declares: "Because racism is a race-explicit system, anti-racism requires race-explicit strategies."

Land Acknowledgements

Another front in the progressive playbook is the recognition of reparations for indigenous tribes that were displaced by European settlers. The wish list for this movement runs the gamut from reciting "land acknowledgments" at public gatherings to the Land Back movement's pursuit of sovereignty over ancestral lands.

The movement's ethos is captured in the science journal Nature, a once-prestigious and now highly politicized publication in print since 1869, which ran a piece last summer written by eight indigenous scholars advocating for an "indigenous agenda in science" rooted in indigenous "lived experience."

"White scholars must recognize, read and cite Indigenous scholarship," the essay says. "But they must also engage with it in deep, relational ways and be open to fully understanding its messages, even if it makes them uncomfortable – especially, we argue, if it makes them uncomfortable."

The scholars echo the spirit of Ibram X. Kendi and critical race theorists who insist that political neutrality is a myth, and that reluctance to endorse their cause is tantamount to endorsing white supremacy:

“Scientists must also attend to their own racism,” the scholars state. “It is not enough to be non-racist. Structural issues and inequities exist in the Western academy. Those who avoid engaging with racism and colonialism in scientific works and spaces merely promote the status quo.”

Trangender issues have been a core concern for Democrats at least since Joe Biden declared them “the civil rights issue of our time" in 2012.
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Transgender politics has now eclipsed racial equity as a rallying point for progressives. Trans “rights” has been a core commitment for Democrats at least since 2012, when then-Vice President Joe Biden first declared that trans rights is “the civil rights issue of our time,” a claim Biden repeated over the years and turned into the moral cornerstone of his presidency while in the White House.

The list of the movement’s demands is encyclopedic in scope. It includes puberty blockers with few questions asked, cross-sex hormones for adolescents, and access to sex-change surgeries. Activists also insist on the constitutional right of biological males who identify as women to access women’s sports, changing rooms, and other facilities. Hundreds of K-12 schools ban

“misgendering” and conceal student gender transitions from parents if the student requests it. These positions are underpinned by years of scholarship in queer theory and gender theory, which question the moral and scientific legitimacy of binary gender and biological sex (see sidebar).

Of the many political conflicts involving transgender advocacy, one involves Catholic nuns in New York who operate a care facility for dying cancer patients. The nuns were threatened with fines by state authorities who demanded that the nuns assign transgender patients to rooms based on stated gender identity rather than biological sex, even over the opposition of a roommate. The state also says the nuns must use patients’ preferred pronouns, including when the patient is not present, or presumably even alive. The Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne have sued New York state officials in federal court to seek an exemption from state policy.

Polyamory Rising

Closely related to transgender activism is the push for full legal recognition for polyamory. Consensual non-monogamy is said to be as central to queer identities and the queer “lived experience,” so that discriminating against polyamory becomes a proxy for discriminating against LGBTQ+ people.

Polyamory continues to receive breathlessly supportive coverage in many legacy media outlets. Wikipedia

The mainline Presbyterian denomination, PCUSA, considered a proposal this summer on whether its clergy should be required to be monogamous or if they can engage in consensual extramarital relations or non-monogamous sex. Notably, the denomination did not reject the idea outright, but referred it to further study.

The queer-affirming group, More Light Presbyterians, released a statement saying that enforcing monogamy is tantamount to discrimination and that a Presbyterian vote for monogamy "will inevitably be experienced and enacted as an attack on queerness."

The normalization of polyamory continues generating breathlessly supportive coverage from elite media that legitimizes and glamorizes free love: Scientific American ("An anthropologist's detailed research shows polyamorists focus on intimacy and honesty, not sleeping around"), Los Angeles Times ("People in polyamorous relationships fight 'shame,' demand legal protections"), and The Guardian ("Polyamorous Americans are celebrating new laws establishing their 'inherent worth and dignity'").

Not everyone in the world of arts and letters is so sanguine about the imminent demise of a protean ideology that seems to have nine lives. As the sombrero-flaunting novelist Lionel Shriver has observed: "This dogma has infected all our institutions like a fungus. It won't be easy to eradicate. Ever notice how quickly, after a full complement of treatments, athlete's foot comes right back?"